

Teachers' Perceptions of Theme-Based Instruction Implemented in Vietnamese EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Theme-based instruction (TBI) is deemed one of the innovative language teaching approaches. However, research on TBI, particularly teachers' viewpoints on TBI in English as a foreign language education at high schools in Vietnam, is still scarce. The current study aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the implementation of TBI at high schools in Dalat City, Vietnam. The explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was employed with sixty-five Vietnamese teachers of English. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were statistically processed (i.e., mean and standard deviation), and the qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed through content analysis. The findings generally indicated that the participants positively perceived the TBI implementation at high schools in the capital city of Lam Dong Province, Vietnam. Specifically, TBI provided EFL learners with merits, e.g., increasing opportunities for improving English vocabulary and competency, strengthening cooperation, enhancing problem-solving and presentation skills, developing cognition, and connecting content to the real world based on their own needs and interests. Additionally, students were expected to take responsibility for their learning, while teachers assumed the roles of resources, facilitators, and motivators. Strikingly, the research revealed discrepancies in perceptions of Task-Based Instruction (TBI) implementation between high school EFL teachers who received formal training from the Department of Education and Training of Lam Dong Province and those who had not undergone such training.

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1 Introduction

Alongside the mainstream of globalization and integration, English has increasingly become a fundamental means of communication in Vietnam and a bridge to link the domestic context with the international one. In primary and secondary education, English is an obligatory subject, i.e., Vietnamese students have to compulsorily learn English at primary schools (grades 3-5) and junior high schools (grades 6-9). According to Vuong (2014), learning English as a foreign language (EFL)

could improve one's scientific knowledge and techniques, broaden one's cultural knowledge, and help people immigrate into the global community. Furthermore, EFL learners primarily achieve purposeful communication in authentic situations during the English teaching and learning process. They are not required to mechanically memorize isolated vocabulary or specific sets of grammar rules. To achieve this, both English teachers and learners must adapt their teaching and learning methods.

Recently, numerous non-traditional EFL teaching and learning methods such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Project-Based Learning (PBL), Content-Based Instruction (CBI) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) have been flourished and introduced (Brown & Lee, 2015). Such emergence is supposed to meet the learners' needs, trigger their motivation, and significantly develop their English language skills to improve their communicative competencies. In practice, when EFL learners tend to use English for communicative purposes, they desire to attend foreign language classes more meaningfully and practically. English teachers need to create a communication-driven environment to utilize English naturally and conceptually to meet their demands. EFL learners can then apply their knowledge and language skills to daily authentic communication settings in a language classroom. This allows theme-based instruction (TBI) to exist and flourish. According to Cameron (2001), TBI emphasizes promoting learners' communicative competence by providing more possibilities for exposure to the target language (L2) through various language-related activities and content-related activities. This process assists EFL learners in getting a meaningful language learning experience. As a result, TBI is regarded as a giant leap for the EFL teaching and learning process.

Remarkably, the benefits of TBI have been demonstrated across various contexts, including primary and secondary education. (Firdaus, Isaeni & Ellianawati, 2018; Prasasti, Hambali & Fiftinova, 2019; Pratomo, Sarwanto & Roemintoyo, 2018; Shibata, 2021) to higher education (Howden et al., 2021; Waluyo, 2019; Wang, 2021). In Vietnam, the implementation of TBI in English lessons may be influenced by teachers' and students' proficiency, teachers' insufficient understanding of TBI, teachers' flexibilities and creation, teachers' training, teachers' skills in classroom management, teachers' readiness, students' needs and interests, relevant materials, time constraint, learning facilities and environments, class size, and the requirements of the national examination. Apparently, EFL teachers play a fundamental role in the learning and teaching process. When they hold positive perceptions of TBI, they may employ different techniques/strategies to implement such an approach efficiently. However, there have been a limited number of empirical studies on the application of TBI in EFL classrooms at high schools worldwide, especially in Vietnam. More importantly, there has been a dearth of research on teachers' perceptions of implementing TBI to teach English at Vietnamese high schools. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate high school teachers' perceptions of TBI in EFL classrooms. The research questions to be addressed are as follows:

1. What are Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of theme-based instruction implemented at high schools?
2. Do the teachers' perceptions of the application of theme-based instruction significantly vary? If so, how?

2 Literature review

Theme-based instruction (TBI) has been defined by various scholars. Snow (2001) proposed three typical content-based models, including adjunct instruction, sheltered instruction, and theme-based instruction. This study addresses TBI rather than the other two models of instruction. TBI is defined as a language-driven strategy that combines language and information that is relevant to learners' interests and specialties (Brinton & Snow, 2017; Lyster, 2018). According to Cameron (2001), TBI emphasizes promoting learners' communicative competence by providing more oppor-

tunities for exposure to the target language (L2) through various language-related activities and content-related activities. It is noted that such activities should be aligned with students' interests (Allen, 2014) and increase students' involvement in completing a task (Guthrie, 1988). Learning activities should also be derived from the real world situations, as these can help students acquire language in a more naturalistic way. (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). This process assists EFL learners in getting a meaningful language learning experience. As a result, TBI is regarded as a giant leap for the EFL teaching and learning process.

In addition to the development of language skills, TBI probably provides more learning chances than traditional approaches and drives higher levels of cognition (Brown & Lee, 2015; Tedick & Lyster, 2020). TBI has become prevalent in many ESL/EFL settings because of its favorable influence on language acquisition (Brinton & Snow, 2017). Furthermore, TBI helped high school students learn about cross-cultural perspectives and environmental challenges by increasing their global awareness (Shibata, 2021). Through a sociocultural scaffolding process, the participants improved their understanding of given themes and realized the relevance of discussing significant global concerns while simultaneously developing communication and teamwork abilities (*ibid.*).

In a TBI classroom, the roles of teachers and learners may be flexible. An EFL teacher is required to be an expert in language and curriculum areas simultaneously (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). To facilitate the TBI implementation, teachers must formulate learning objectives and/or design diverse teaching and learning activities pertaining to the chosen theme (Cameron, 2001; Harmer, 1991; Maming et al., 2023). Teachers can function as facilitators and supervisors (Brinton & Snow, 2003; Cameron, 2001), evaluators (Maming et al., 2023), and motivators/encouragers (Cameron, 2001; Harmer, 1991). In comparison, EFL learners need to become autonomous, mutually supported, and enthusiastically involved in task processing in a theme-based classroom. As students are given autonomy and cooperation, they may take this opportunity to learn from each other and improve themselves (Troncale, 2002). According to Di Pietro (1987), EFL learners might take on the role of preppers, responsible for planning a speaking task before performing it in class. In a nutshell, when both teachers and learners hold positive perceptions of TBI, they may employ different techniques/strategies to implement such an approach efficiently.

Prior studies have shown that TBI brings benefits to EFL learners. Amalia (2019) examined the effectiveness of TBI on reading activities, especially in a narrative text. Classroom action research was done through planning, action, observation, and reflection. A descriptive qualitative and quantitative design was used in this study. This study was conducted at SMP Muhammadiyah 58 Sukaramai Medan, involving twenty-six students and one English teacher. Students' reading scores were based on the pre-test result and the results of the two cycles. The findings indicated that the use of theme-based teaching in reading activities not only made students more engaged and active in their reading classes but also helped improve their reading comprehension. Besides reading skills, TBI is assumed to benefit students' writing skills. Prasasti et al. (2019) pointed out that students' narrative writing achievement improved through the employment of TBI.

In brief, the integration of TBI into English teaching represents a relatively new development in the field. In a broader sense, Chowdhury's (2017) study aimed to investigate the attitudes of 700 female and male teachers at secondary schools in West Bengal, India towards CLIL. It should be noted that CLIL consists of three models (e.g., adjunct, sheltered, and theme-based). The research employed a questionnaire and unstructured interviews to collect data. The findings showed the teachers' dearth of confidence and exposure to CLIL. It was suggested that there should be professional training in CLIL for in-service teachers. In Vietnam, Nguyen (2016) discussed four critiques relating to the CLIL implementation under Vietnam's National Foreign Language 2020 Project, including the role of CLIL in Vietnam, teachers' willingness, students' willingness, and CLIL-based materials. This suggests that for successful implementation of CLIL and TBI in language classrooms, both teachers and students are indispensable influencing factors.

Recently, Nguyen (2019) conducted a study that aimed to explore high school students' and teachers' perceptions of CLIL in Vietnam. Two sets of questionnaires were used to collect the quantitative data from the students, i.e., the first questionnaire was to obtain preliminary results prior to

the CLIL implementation; the second one was to check if there were changes after the CLIL implementation. Meanwhile, interviews were conducted with teachers responsible for these CLIL classes. The findings showed discrepancies between teachers' and students' perceptions of the benefits and shortcomings of CLIL. However, empirical research on implementing TBI in teaching EFL at high schools worldwide, especially in Vietnam, is quite limited. Additionally, there exists a vague concept of TBI, making it challenging for teachers to apply it effectively in language classrooms. While most TBI studies focus on teaching the English language, they often overlook other commonly taught language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—as well as students' viewpoints. More importantly, empirical research on high school teachers' perceptions of implementing TBI in teaching EFL has been minimal. Therefore, this study aims to address that research gap in the context of Vietnam.

3 Methodology

3.1 *Research context*

This study was conducted at high schools in Dalat City, Lam Dong province, Vietnam. In particular, Lam Dong province is recognized as one of the top regions in terms of English teaching quality in the annual national examinations. Regarding learning facilities and conditions, class sizes range from 35 to 45 students. All classrooms at high schools in Dalat City are equipped with projectors, speakers, and cassette players to support English teaching and learning, but there are no language laboratories to practice English speaking and listening skills. Generally, students have three English classes every week so that they can learn and practice English frequently. It is noteworthy that each high school in Lam Dong province is required to establish an English-speaking club, according to a directive from the Department of Education and Training (DOET). This club serves as a playground for EFL students to use English as naturally and effectively as possible.

Concerning the characteristics of the high school students in Dalat City, they exhibit varying levels of English proficiency. Students with a high level of English proficiency—such as those aiming for scholarships to study abroad, possessing a strong ambition to learn a foreign language for admission to reputable universities, or endeavoring to succeed in further studies—make significant efforts to study English both inside and outside the classroom. In contrast, students who view English simply as a compulsory subject in the curriculum tend to spend little time studying it or may even neglect it altogether. Students in urban areas often have numerous opportunities to interact with foreigners from various English-speaking countries, which helps to strengthen their language skills, particularly in speaking and listening. However, students in rural areas have few opportunities to communicate with speakers of other languages, and there are typically no foreign language centers available in these locations. As a result, they often miss the chance to practice English outside the classroom or in real-life communication situations.

In respect of the current curriculum and textbooks, several Dalat City-based high schools have utilized the introductory English textbooks designed by MOET of Vietnam published in 2006. The series of textbooks used for grades 10-12 respectively consists of "Tieng Anh 10" (English 10), "Tieng Anh 11" (English 11), and "Tieng Anh 12" (English 12). The content of the three textbooks is categorized into six main themes (e.g., you and me, education, community, nature, recreation, and people and places). The textbooks aim to enhance students' communicative competence through these themes (Hoang, 2011). The textbooks comprise sixteen teaching units and six review units. Each teaching unit consists of five sections: reading, speaking, listening, writing, and language focus. Every 45 minutes, students focus on a distinct skill for the same topic, except for the last section including pronunciation and grammar. According to the curriculum, both formative and summative assessments are officially implemented. The formative assessment includes various forms such as oral tests, fifteen-minute tests, projects, portfolios, presentations, etc. The summative assessment consists of the midterm examination and the end-of-term examination.

Alongside the innovative curriculum, EFL teachers have been receiving official 3-month training in CLIL with a focus on TBI annually since 2019. Initially, the head of the English department from each high school was called to attend the training session, and these trainees were then responsible for sharing the insights and techniques learned with their colleagues at their respective schools. When this study was conducted, not many teachers had attended formal training offered by SEAMEO RETRAC, Vietnam or other academic organizations.

3.2 *Research participants*

This study involved 65 Vietnamese teachers of English conveniently sampled from 11 high schools in Dalat City in answering a questionnaire. There were 61 female participants (93.8%) and 4 male participants (6.2%). Additionally, 61 participants (93.8%) have had more than ten years of English teaching, whereas the same figures for those who have been teaching English for 6-10 years (3.1%) and those having 1-5 years of English teaching (3.1%). In terms of TBI-related skills and knowledge, the majority of the participants (61.5%) did not participate in formal training courses on TBI in the past five years. While 50 out of 65 participants (76.5%) had observed TBI-based classes to learn about TBI, fifteen participants (23.1%) had not participated in such observational learning. Ten English teachers were purposively invited for semi-structured interviews; five of these participants had attended TBI training courses, while the remaining five had not.

3.3 *Research instruments*

To reach the overall goal, this study administered an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. A closed-ended questionnaire was administered to the respondents, and the quantitative data were analyzed. Following this, semi-structured interviews were employed to collect qualitative data that elaborated the quantitative data.

The questionnaire used in the present study was adapted from Chowdhury's (2017) study. In particular, the questionnaire collected quantitative data on EFL teachers' perceptions of theme-based instruction in teaching English as a foreign language at Dalat City-based high schools. It was divided into two parts: Part A was about the respondent's demographic information regarding gender, English teaching experience, and TBI-related skills and knowledge; Part B contained 31 items with the five-point Likert scale (*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly agree*). This section was categorized into five subtopics: (1) the usefulness of TBI in general (items 1-5), (2) the usefulness of TBI to EFL learners (items 6-13), (3) the requirements for EFL learners in the TBI classroom (items 14-21), (4) the requirements for EFL teachers in the TBI classroom (items 22-27), (5) the requirements for activities in the TBI classroom (items 29-30). The questionnaire was first constructed in English and then translated into Vietnamese – the respondents' mother tongue so that they did not have any language barriers in answering the questionnaire items although they were teachers of English. In addition, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .85 which reaches the level of 'good' ($.80 < \alpha < .90$). This means that the questionnaire is reliable enough as the internal consistency of the questionnaire items is ensured.

Besides the questionnaire, the respondents' perceptions of implementing TBI in English teaching were elaborately explored through individual semi-structured interviews. The interviews of ten English teachers were employed for in-depth information. The interview questions were also conducted in Vietnamese. To increase the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, after transcribing the information, the researchers sent the transcript to the participants for a double-check. Additionally, the two researchers analyzed the data independently and subsequently cross-checked their analyses to ensure consistency. We used interrater reliability to reduce the subjectivity of the qualitative data analysis.

3.4 Procedures for data collection and analysis

Regarding the quantitative data, the questionnaire was designed on Google form and sent to five English teachers in different high schools to pilot for its clarity and comprehensibility. Subsequently, the questionnaire was administered online to 65 English teachers at high schools based in Dalat City. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were briefed on the purpose of the research and provided instructions on how to proceed. They spent approximately fifteen minutes completing all the questionnaire items via Google form. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics e.g., mean (M) and standard deviation (SD), and inferential statistics e.g., Welch's t-test.

In terms of the qualitative data, ten selected teachers were invited for semi-structured interviews after the delivery and data analysis of the questionnaire. Each interview lasting roughly 20 minutes was recorded for later analysis. Simultaneously, notes were taken during the interviews. The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed through content analysis with three steps, viz. familiarizing and organizing, coding and recoding, and summarizing and interpreting. The interviewees were labeled as T1 to T5 for the trained EFL teachers and T6 to T10 for the untrained EFL teachers.

4 Findings

4.1 Teachers' perceptions of TBI implemented at Dalat City-based high schools

The descriptive statistics in terms of mean and standard deviation for the categories of TBI are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The overall results of EFL teachers' perceptions of the TBI implementation at Dalat City-based high schools

| No. | Categories | n = 65 | |
|-----|--|--------|-----|
| | | M | SD |
| 1 | The requirements for EFL teachers in the TBI classroom | 4.08 | .42 |
| 2 | The requirements for EFL learners in the TBI classroom | 4.00 | .38 |
| 3 | The requirements for activities in the TBI classroom | 4.00 | .59 |
| 4 | The usefulness of TBI in general | 3.93 | .41 |
| 5 | The usefulness of TBI to EFL learners | 3.91 | .26 |
| | Average | 3.91 | .29 |

M: mean; SD: Standard deviation

The results in Table 1 reveal that the participants in this research positively perceived the necessity of the implementation of TBI in the EFL classroom (M=3.91; SD=.29). It was evident that the agreement of the requirements for EFL teachers in the TBI classroom was relatively high (M=4.08; SD=.42). Moreover, there was a high level of agreement for the requirements for the EFL learners (M=4.00; SD=.38) and the requirements for activities in the TBI classroom (M=4.00; SD=.59). This suggests that the participants strongly recognized the importance of applying TBI in the EFL classroom. They also possessed a high agreement level of the usefulness of TBI in general (M=3.93; SD=.41) and the usefulness of TBI to EFL learners (M=3.91; SD=.26). This indicates that the participants highly valued the merits of TBI in an EFL classroom.

4.1.1 The requirements for EFL teachers in the TBI classroom

The results in Table 2 depict that most of the respondents highly agreed that it is essential to seek suitable English resources related to a theme (item 25: M=4.31, SD=0.56). These resources greatly assist students during their group work. Moreover, choosing an appropriate English theme that motivates EFL students in the TBI classroom is necessary (item 27: M=4.20, SD=0.75). Additionally,

teachers play a fundamental role in encouraging students to use English (item 22: $M=4.17$, $SD=0.63$) and connect their prior knowledge with the new one (item 24: $M=4.06$, $SD=0.46$). Typically, a theme can be divided into sub-topics, which are coherently linked to present a comprehensive overview of the main theme. Hence, linking subtopics coherently (item 23: $M=3.99$, $SD=0.74$) is required. Another important consideration is that teachers need to provide students with meaningful contexts, enabling them to effectively use English in relevant and practical situations (item 26: $M=3.77$, $SD=0.77$). It can be inferred that the participants went beyond merely teaching the contents available in the textbook, also considering engaging topics to enhance the learning experience. This choice is crucial because it possibly motivates student's interest in learning English.

Table 2. The requirements for EFL teachers in the TBI classroom

| Item | Content | Rank | n = 65 | |
|---------|---|------|--------|-----|
| | | | M | SD |
| 22 | EFL teachers need to motivate EFL students to use English. | 3 | 4.17 | .63 |
| 23 | EFL teachers need to link English subtopics coherently. | 5 | 3.99 | .74 |
| 24 | EFL teachers need to activate students' background knowledge. | 4 | 4.06 | .46 |
| 25 | EFL teachers need to find suitable English resources related to a theme. | 1 | 4.31 | .56 |
| 26 | EFL teachers need to provide a meaningful context to use English for EFL students. | 6 | 3.77 | .77 |
| 27 | EFL teachers need to choose an English theme/topic to motivate EFL students in a class. | 2 | 4.20 | .75 |
| Average | | | 4.08 | .42 |

Qualitatively, EFL teachers are required to meet certain criteria to enhance learning effectiveness. These include selecting topics that relate to students' needs, life experiences, and areas of specialty, encouraging them to integrate existing information with new knowledge, and providing learners with relevant English materials. More specifically, a few teachers attributed the success of a TBI lesson to the choice of themes, highlighting the importance of selecting appropriate themes for effective teaching. T4 emphasized that if the theme is related to students' interests and needs, they are more likely to have a wealth of ideas to contribute. Otherwise, they probably feel bored with and tired of the lesson. Additionally, teachers need to encourage students to connect all information related to the theme, including both their prior knowledge and new information they acquire. According to T1, the connection between the existing knowledge and the prior knowledge may promote students' cognitive processes. As for the supplementary materials, T5 suggested that teachers should share reliable and relevant English resources so that students can make use of useful information to modify their topics.

4.1.2 The requirements for EFL learners in the TBI classroom

In the TBI classroom, learners were required to become thoroughly active and creative in the learning process. As shown in Table 3, the mean score values of working in groups to develop a particular task under the EFL teacher's guidance were highest (item 17: $M=4.17$; $SD=.63$). Besides completing a particular task by using the content in English (item 14: $M=4.08$; $SD=.57$), students are also expected to review and correct their peers' assignments (item 21: $M=4.09$; $SD=.58$). Furthermore, to ensure they have sufficient theme-related content, students are required to search for English resources on the Internet (item 19: $M=4.08$; $SD=.27$). More importantly, they used English frequently to improve their English proficiency during group work, especially during the presentation (item 18: $M=4.06$; $SD=.68$) and pair work (item 15: $M=3.68$; $SD=1.05$). In the TBI classroom, students are encouraged to develop the ability to assess their own work (item 20: $M=3.85$; $SD=.78$) and reflect on both their work and that of their peers (item 16: $M=3.97$; $SD=.73$).

Table 3. The requirements for EFL learners in the TBI classroom

| Item | Content | Rank | n = 65 | |
|---------|---|------|--------|------|
| | | | M | SD |
| 14 | EFL students need to carry out a specific task in which they use the content learned in English. | 4 | 4.08 | .57 |
| 15 | EFL students need to use English during pair work. | 8 | 3.68 | 1.05 |
| 16 | EFL students need to make reflections in English in the TBI classroom. | 6 | 3.97 | .73 |
| 17 | EFL students need to work in groups in English to develop a specific task under the EFL teacher's guidance. | 1 | 4.17 | .63 |
| 18 | EFL students need to use English in the presentation. | 5 | 4.06 | .68 |
| 19 | EFL students need to search for some English information on the Internet for the TBI classroom. | 3 | 4.08 | .27 |
| 20 | EFL students need to conduct self-assessment in English in the TBI classroom. | 7 | 3.85 | .78 |
| 21 | EFL students need to conduct peer assessment in English for the TBI classroom. | 2 | 4.09 | .58 |
| Average | | | 4.00 | .38 |

Aligning with the quantitative data, the qualitative data reveal specific requirements that the students need to satisfy when TBI is implemented in an EFL classroom. First, teachers believed that it was vital for students to employ multiple skills together with English language skills to handle a task or assignment such as critical thinking, peer feedback, collaboration, problem-solving, group management, and reflection.

In the TBI classroom, students have to integrate many skills such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking to talk about the theme. (T6)

To get along well with their peers, students need to employ a variety of competencies such as cooperation, group work, critical thinking, problem-solving, and group leading. (T7)

Students need to actively interact with others during group work, correction, and commentating. (T4)

Through working on a topic, a plethora of learning activities take place, e.g. discussion, making video clips, interviewing, making diagrams, making posters, role-play, presentation, self-assessment, peer correction, etc. (T3)

Another requirement is associated with using English inside and outside the classroom, e.g., speaking English in both in-class and out-of-class tasks. In this sense, learners become autonomous learners.

Teachers encourage students to use English during group work and not use their mother tongue by giving some rules. (T1)

Students need to get acquainted with speaking English inside and outside the classroom. (T5)

4.1.3 The requirements for activities in the TBI classroom

English learning activities designed in the TBI classroom should be varied and stimulating to effectively engage students in the lesson. As shown in Table 4, it is worth noting that English learning activities must encourage EFL students' participation (item 30: M=4.30, SD=.61). The participants expressed strong agreement that the activities arising from students' needs and interests (item 28: M=3.89, SD=.77) and the real world (item 29: M=3.80, SD=.87) were highly effective.

Table 4. The requirements for activities in the TBI classroom

| Item | Content | Rank | n = 65 | |
|---------|---|------|--------|-----|
| | | | M | SD |
| 29 | English learning activities must be derived from real-world contexts. | 3 | 3.80 | .87 |
| 28 | English learning activities must be derived from EFL students' needs and interests. | 2 | 3.89 | .77 |
| 30 | English learning activities must be engaging. | 1 | 4.30 | .61 |
| Average | | | 4.00 | .59 |

The interviewees agreed on various requirements for learning activities in the TBI classroom. These activities must be meaningful, interesting, enjoyable, and engaging. The participants recommended a variety of techniques/activities to meet such requirements.

Teachers need to design diverse learning activities such as role-plays, interviews, portfolios, games, presentations, making video clips, making posters, fashionable shows, etc. The classroom atmosphere will become dull and stressful if students ignore what is happening in the class. (T2)

To motivate students in the TBI classroom, teachers need to create real contexts close to them. (T5)

4.1.4 The usefulness of the TBI in general

The average mean score of the usefulness of TBI shows that the implementation of TBI may benefit EFL students ($M=3.93$; $SD=.41$). As shown in Table 5, the participants believed that TBI may enable them to acquire the English language (item 3: $M=4.05$; $SD=.74$), comprehend content in English (item 2: $M=4.03$; $SD=.68$) and simultaneously achieve proficiency in both the language and content (item 4: $M=3.89$; $SD=.73$). In addition, the implementation of TBI helped develop students' cognitive processes, enabling them to thoroughly grasp all content areas of a topic in English (item 1: $M=3.92$; $SD=.83$). Therefore, the participants believed that students' English proficiency in the TBI classroom improved faster than that in a regular English class (item 5: $M=3.74$; $SD=.69$). In brief, the participants recognized the substantial contribution of TBI to enhancing students' language proficiency and their development of content knowledge.

Table 5. The usefulness of TBI in general

| Item | Content | Rank | n = 65 | |
|---------|---|------|--------|-----|
| | | | M | SD |
| 1 | TBI leads to the development of cognition needed to understand all content areas around a topic in English. | 3 | 3.92 | .83 |
| 2 | TBI is useful for content acquisition in the English language. | 2 | 4.03 | .68 |
| 3 | TBI is useful for English language acquisition. | 1 | 4.05 | .74 |
| 4 | TBI is useful for both English and content in English. | 4 | 3.89 | .73 |
| 5 | English proficiency is developed faster in a TBI classroom than in an English classroom. | 5 | 3.74 | .69 |
| Average | | | 3.93 | .41 |

The interviewees agreed that implementing TBI in the EFL classroom was highly beneficial for both English language learning and understanding content presented in English. In terms of language development, T4 affirmed that students probably used the target language frequently through diverse learning activities. More specifically, broadening lexical resources was considered as an example of language enhancement. According to T1, students used a wide range of vocabulary related to a topic while they actively searched for lexical items pertinent to that topic. Meanwhile, one teacher (T8)

who had not undergone formal training in TBI, reported on the procedure she used to apply TBI in her classroom. Clearly, the students had an opportunity to master the content of the topic through the use of TBI strategies in the classroom. As a result, the students presented the content of the topic confidently.

In a TBI classroom, students have 2-3 weeks to prepare a topic, and they are required to find the necessary information concerning the topic. After that, they select and put significant content into a mind map, a diagram, short video clips, etc. (T8)

Students present the content of the topic in class with confidence. Gradually, they broaden their English around the topics. (T4)

4.1.5 The usefulness of the TBI to EFL learners

Regarding the respondents' perspectives on the usefulness of the TBI to EFL learners, it is apparent from Table 6 that the EFL students thought that it is vital to seize opportunities to orally present their work in English (item 6: M=4.11; SD=.47), practice making topic-related videos in English (item 7: M=4.06; SD=.46), participate in group work to discuss the relevant topic in English (item 8: M=4.00; SD=.59) and role-play in English (item 10: M=4.00; SD=.40). Moreover, TBI somehow helps EFL learners listen to their peers' presentations related to the content in English (item 9: M=3.92; SD=.64). EFL learners can also practice doing English interviews related to the topic in the TBI classroom (item 11: M=3.88; SD=.63). This is followed by the mean scores of reading specific texts in English (item 12: M=3.79; SD=.41) and reading instructions of English texts with different topics (item 13: M=3.51; SD=1.00).

Table 6. The usefulness of TBI to EFL learners

| Item | Content | Rank | n = 65 | |
|---------|--|------|--------|------|
| | | | M | SD |
| 6 | Oral presentations in English can be practiced in the TBI classroom. | 1 | 4.11 | .47 |
| 7 | Making topic-related videos in English can be practiced in the TBI classroom. | 2 | 4.06 | .46 |
| 8 | Participating in content-related group work in English is helpful for EFL students in the TBI classroom. | 4 | 4.00 | .59 |
| 10 | Making topic-related role-play in English can be practiced in the TBI classroom. | 3 | 4.00 | .40 |
| 9 | Listening to content-related presentations in English by peers can be helpful in the TBI classroom. | 5 | 3.92 | .64 |
| 11 | Doing topic-related interviews in English can be practiced in the TBI classroom. | 6 | 3.88 | .63 |
| 12 | Reading specific texts in English can be done in the TBI classroom. | 7 | 3.79 | .41 |
| 13 | Reading instructions in different areas of content in English can be done in the TBI classroom. | 8 | 3.51 | 1.00 |
| Average | | | 3.91 | .26 |

According to the participants' responses in the interview, TBI offers benefits for the EFL learners. These advantages include developing language competence, learning extensively from peers, expressing their thoughts more clearly, and enhancing their presentation skills. One representative of the teachers who had never taken any training courses regarding TBI found that students could learn a lot from their peers when working together to make their products around the topic such as short video clips, mind diagrams, posters, interviews, etc.

Students can learn such knowledge and skills as vocabulary, grammatical structures, learning style, skills of cooperating, solving problems, information technology, and presentation in a TBI classroom. (T8)

Additionally, students had a great opportunity to express their ideas or thoughts in group settings and improve their presentation skills when they engaged in TBI-based tasks.

During group work, they interact with others. They are given a chance to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings, exchange their opinions, and actively argue with others to create good products. (T4)

After finishing their assignments, students present concisely and thoroughly what they have prepared in front of the class. Other groups listen to them carefully and possibly raise questions about what they have not got yet. (T3)

4.2 Differences in perceptions of theme-based instruction between the formally trained EFL teachers and the untrained EFL teachers

To compare the perceptions of the trained EFL teachers (n=25) and the untrained EFL teachers (n=40), the researchers ran the test of homogeneity of variances to check if the variances between the two groups were equal. The result reveals that the level of significance ($p=.00$) for Levene's test (F-test) was less than .05. This means that the variances of the two groups are not equal. Therefore, a Welch's t-test was calculated instead of an independent samples t-test because of unequal sample sizes and variances.

Table 7. Welch's t-test results

| | Statistic^a | df1 | df2 | Sig. |
|-------|------------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Welch | 17.72 | 1 | 31.47 | .00 |

a. Asymptotically F distributed.

As shown in Table 7, the p-value was statistically smaller than the level of significance ($p=.00<.01$). This suggests that there was a significant difference in perceptions of the TBI between formally trained and untrained EFL teachers at high schools in Dalat City.

The qualitative findings from the interviews revealed that formally trained interviewees endorsed the implementation of TBI in EFL classrooms, recognizing it as beneficial for both learning and teaching. According to the interviewees, TBI helped broaden EFL learners' vocabulary and knowledge, actively and enthusiastically participate in the lesson, and gain confidence.

Students in the TBI classroom get more vocabulary and knowledge about the theme than others in regular classrooms. (T1)

Learners cooperated with others to complete a particular task effectively. (T4)

EFL teachers with formal training identified several distinctions in the learning activities of TBI classrooms compared to those in traditional classrooms. For example, the students were highly engaged in learning and understanding the materials due to the flexibility in choosing topics.

Learning activities in the TBI classroom are not the same as in other EFL classrooms because students are extremely active in mastering the knowledge by finding topic-related content in groups and then systematizing it methodically. (T1)

Choosing the topic is very flexible. EFL students can select a topic in their textbook or another topic they would like to present most. (T2)

Choosing the topic depends on the learners, and the teacher has to support them with English materials and resources. Therefore, they can get many more grammatical structures to modify their presentation. (T5)

However, some interviewed teachers who had not received formal training in TBI candidly expressed that implementing TBI in an EFL classroom was inefficient and time-consuming (T6). It was pointed out that students did not have sufficient time to master all the subjects during the academic year. Through TBI, according to her, the students might go over one or two themes they have learned rather than all themes scheduled. One of the interviewees (T8) highlighted an additional challenge related to the varying proficiency levels among students, stating that "the TBI classroom is not useful for all students." Regarding teacher-related issues, classroom management and the time required for preparation were identified as significant challenges.

The teacher cannot manage their English speaking during the group work process outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, they must present their product, so they have to use English, and teachers can only assess their English speaking at this time. (T9)

Both teachers and students in the TBI classroom can be put under pressure because they have to prepare many things for their presentations. (T10)

5 Discussion

According to the quantitative and qualitative results, the target participants had positive perceptions of the TBI implementation. This finding is similar to the results of other studies (Amalia, 2019; Prasasti et al., 2019). Most of them agreed that utilizing TBI in the EFL classroom was beneficial to the EFL learners. Overall, the participants acknowledged that through the learning activities, students were highly exposed to the target language, which contributed to a gradual improvement in their English proficiency. In a similar vein, Brinton and Snow (2017) realize that TBI has a great influence on language acquisition. Specifically, most respondents reported that TBI assisted them gradually expand their English vocabulary relating to various topics. This was because they had prepared for these topics at home and subsequently felt confident presenting them in class. This finding agrees with Oghyanous's (2018) study that TBI significantly enhances the learning of new lexical items compared to conventional instruction. In addition to the development of English language proficiency, there was considerable growth in English content knowledge and cognitive skills. TBI may offer more learning opportunities than traditional techniques and promote higher levels of cognition development (Brown & Lee, 2015; Tedick & Lyster, 2020).

In a TBI classroom, the roles and requirements for teachers and learners are distinct. The teacher acts as a resource, facilitator, and motivator, enhancing learner autonomy. Meanwhile, learners are expected to be autonomous and proactive in their learning process, actively engaging with and exploring the subject matter. The learning activities must be associated with real-life communication.

5.1 Teacher as a resource, a facilitator, and a motivator

It was evident that a teacher needed to find and share relevant English resources related to the theme, allowing students to access useful information to refine their topics. The findings are in line with Richards and Rodgers's (2001) position that the language teacher is an expert in language and curriculum areas, so resources shared by the teacher are necessary. That is not to say, the learning process relies merely on materials provided by the teacher. In this regard, a teacher is supposed to be a resource. A teacher not only supplies reliable learning resources but also creates a variety of meaningful and stimulating activities based on real-world scenarios to boost learner engagement. According to Amilia (2019), learner engagement can be boosted in a TBI classroom. Therefore, it is essential for the teacher to design engaging activities as group discussions, video clips, interviews, diagrams, posters, role-plays, and presentations. A teacher may be a facilitator and motivator who stimulates students' background knowledge and motivates students' learning performance.

5.2 *Student as an autonomous learner*

It was indicated that students had to proactively interact with others to complete a particular task, search for English materials on the Internet, and frequently use English to improve their English skills while working in groups and assessing their tasks and others' tasks in the TBI classroom. Students are assumed to be autonomous in the TBI classroom. Students' roles identified in this study are partly like those defined by previous scholars (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). It is noteworthy that learner autonomy does not mean that students learn individually. This finding is advocated by the viewpoint that students should take control over their learning in an EFL classroom (Benson, 2011; Duong, 2015), and learner autonomy can be promoted in CLIL classrooms (Andriani, Padmadewi, & Budasi, 2018; Marković, Prnjat, & Vraneš, 2016; Troncale, 2002). However, the teacher participants who had not attended formal training sessions were skeptical about students' self-assessments and peer assessments. These findings are contrary to the viewpoints of learner autonomy advocates (Gardner, 2000; Hamp-Lyons & Condon 2000). These authors confirmed that self-assessments and peer assessments are indispensable autonomous learning competencies. It can be interpreted that teachers might not equip students with assessment-related competencies as found by Gardner (2000) and Tran and Duong (2018). Duong (2021) suggested that the teacher should guide students on how to conduct these assessments at the beginning of the course to gain confidence and efficiency.

5.3 *Communicative learning activities*

According to the participants, a variety of learning activities in the TBI classroom such as group discussion, video clips, interviews, mind maps, posters, role-plays, presentations, etc. were utilized to promote communicative competence. They also revealed that learning activities used in TBI classrooms must be authentic, relevant, and engaging. The findings agree with the viewpoints of several authors (Alen, 2014; Cameron, 2001; Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010; Guthrie, 1988) that TBI-based learning activities should expose students to a highly contextualized language learning environment, correspond with learners' needs, and promote learner engagement. In a theme-based course, a range of activities that are integrated around a subject matter create meaningful and stimulating uses of the target language (Cameron, 2001; Wesche & Skehan, 2002).

6 Conclusion

According to the findings of the current study, the EFL teachers in Dalat City high schools held favorable views on the TBI implementation. Implementing TBI was influential in the EFL classroom. It helped EFL learners improve English vocabulary and proficiency, develop English content and cognition, connect the content to the real world and their needs and interests, and strengthen their cooperating skills, problem-solving skills, information technology, and presentation skills. It creates frequent opportunities to be exposed to the target language. Learning activities in the TBI classroom were various, meaningful, and stimulating. Regarding the differences in perceptions of the TBI between the trained EFL teachers and the untrained EFL teachers, the current study has found a significant difference between the two groups of teachers.

Some pedagogical implications can be drawn as follows. Firstly, it is necessary to consider the objectives of foreign language teaching standards, the policy decision on promoting continuity in TBI, the goals of the school curriculum, the specific needs and specialties of students, and the context and circumstances in which both students and teachers operate. Secondly, administrators should organize seminars or conferences on TBI to raise EFL teachers' awareness and skills of TBI in strengthening students' language skills and broadening their horizons. Thirdly, students need to have thoroughly active and creative agendas in the learning process, be involved in choosing topics, develop the habit of using English during discussions and group work both inside and outside the classroom, connect the previous knowledge with the new ones to broaden their knowledge regularly, employ peer correction, self-assessment, and reflection in English frequently during the presentation

process. Finally, teachers have to assess students' social and cultural realities and needs, as well as their locality and living environment, as well as their future objectives for academic education and future jobs; combine authentic material with the units of a coursebook to cover the goals of language standards and school curricula; be creative and well-organized in language instruction and lesson planning; incorporate communicative tasks and learning activities; stimulate English discourse and activate students' excitement and self-confidence in speaking English.

In terms of limitations, the sample size of this study was relatively small (n=65); however, the researchers attempted to involve most of the EFL teachers from 11 high schools in Dalat City, Lam Dong Province responding to the questionnaire. To decrease this limitation, further research should be carried out on a larger scale. More specifically, teachers of English in the whole province should participate in future research to ensure the representativeness of the participants and increase the reliability of the research. Furthermore, this study emphasizes a survey of teachers' perceptions rather than the experiment. It is suggested that future researchers experiment with TBI to prove the effectiveness of this approach in the EFL context.

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